

# Blind Fiddler Finds Beauty

(Continued From Page 1 C)

wanted to enter the world competition at Texas.

Mr. Kirkhuff said:

"But word got around and some donations came in. One boy emptied his piggy bank. Miles Searfoss of Lawton drove his car. . . ."

During the interview, Mr. Kirkhuff played such tunes on his fiddle as "Buffalo Gal," "Golden Slippers," "Dzianzio," "Turkey in the Straw," "Juanita," and "Dixie."

He also recalled the years when the late Sir Hubert Wilkins lived on a farm near the Kirkhuff's and he reminisced about some of the talks he had with the Arctic explorer.

He remembered the day Sir Hubert returned to Lawton, met Mr. Kirkhuff and told him, "I'm engaged in secret work I cannot talk about."

Mr. Kirkhuff said that he replied, "Oh, that's all right. There are other subjects we can talk about."

And they did talk for about a half hour, he said.

As a baby, Mr. Kirkhuff suffered an inflammation of the iris of his eyes, which rendered the membranes opaque.

"It stayed long enough to ruin me, but not quite," he said.

Until he went completely blind, about 12 years ago, he was able to read by holding books and music about three inches from his eyes.

He didn't go to school until he was 11 but his mother taught him at home.

When he entered the Rush School system, he skipped six grades in one year but still was unable to complete the three years of high school at the age of 16.

One reason was, he said, "I had a long spell of sickness."

Another reason was, he said, he couldn't get to school on too many days because the mud of

the roads was "hip deep to a tall Indian."

Mr. Kirkhuff said that the snows of the Lawton hills "can be hub-cap deep to a Ferris wheel."

Mr. Kirkhuff said that his grandfather, who fought in the Civil War, and an uncle, also named Jehile, were fiddlers.

Three of his cousins bought violins from a mail order house but soon gave up trying to learn how to play them.

One of them gave his violin to Mr. Kirkhuff.

"I'd fool with it, but I couldn't get a clear tone."

He said that he became so discouraged that he told his mother, who was to die when he was 9, that "I'll never touch this thing again. I put it under my bed, but three weeks later I picked it up again."

"I got a clear tone on the E string and little by little I kept going on it."

The uncle who was a fiddler

"lived across the hill from us on the next ridge. When he'd come over to our house, I'd ask him to play 'The Devil's Dream,'" he said.

The first tune that the boy learned to play was "The Devil's Dream." He laughed as he recalled playing it the first time for his uncle, saying, "Did I have a surprised old man!"

He said he took lessons from violin teachers at Friendsville and at Montrose and that he learned "from old timers who had learned from old timers."

He won the fiddling championship of Susquehanna County, Pa., in 1926, when he was 18 years old.

He said "things were going good" when his father called him back to the farm in 1927. His father died in 1930. Uncle Jehile moved in to live with him until he died in 1933. Soon afterward, he "played some, helped people with their bees, gave up the farm, and got married in 1938."

He said that he and his wife, Lola, who was to die in 1951, lived in rented quarters in several parts of the Lawton area.

He made money selling honey and playing his fiddle for a club of about 40 members interested "in the preservation of old time music and square dancing," he said.

Mr. Kirkhuff said he "didn't do much" during the World War 2 years.

He won the Pennsylvania state championship in fiddling in 1947 and in 1953, the year before he went to Texas.

Mr. Kirkhuff lives at the house of Mrs. Leah Bortzman and her grown son, William. The house is on a hillside off a dirt road.

He occupies a room with a bed, coal-burning stove, chair and a desk on which he has a telephone and a small transistor radio. The room also contains an organ, a piano and two old victrolas, all antiques. The house is lit by kerosene lamps.

He wants to wait until he is

in Art--

65, about two years hence, before he applies for Social Security benefits.

His violin, a Saxony, is one that he acquired in a trade for "my old Crenona" and a certain amount of cash. The black violin case lay on the bed. One side of it was dusty.

Mr. Kirkhuff said he's "mostly Dutch, with a little French." He said that he earned some money this year selling honey, and added, "We're not in too bad shape up here."

Of his youth he said, "I'm a country boy but I often went to town in the '20's."

He was an only child. All of his relatives have died. He and his wife had no children, so he is the last of the clan.

He also is afraid that he is among the last of the old-time fiddlers.

A man in a restaurant in Lawton said, "It's a shame. Such a waste of talent."

Another man, nodded at a juke box and said, "There are a lot of guys who really can't play their guitars earning millions."